



# IID

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January 17, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue, Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

I write to you on behalf of the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) and its Board of Directors to request your assistance in securing a federal commitment from the 2018 Farm Bill of \$200 million to address the critical agricultural and environmental concerns facing California's Salton Sea anticipated to be caused by the current and upcoming drought on the Colorado River.

The IID is an irrigation district serving the Imperial Valley in Southern California. Established in 1911, with over 5,400 farm accounts, the IID is entitled to 3.1 million acre-feet annually of Colorado River water, which it delivers to irrigate approximately a half-million acres of highly productive farmland. The delivery of water in the Imperial Valley is vital to sustain an agriculture industry that is at the center of the local community and is estimated to provide more than two-thirds of vegetables consumed in the United States each winter. The IID also provides wholesale water to seven municipalities, a utility district and a Navy base within its approximately 1,658 square mile service area. As one of the largest irrigation districts in the nation, the IID maintains more than 3,000 miles of canals and drains. The IID has invested tens of millions of dollars in conservation technologies to improve agricultural efficiency and has plans for continuation of these efforts, as funding becomes available. In addition to delivering water, the IID also supplies electrical energy to residents of the Imperial and Coachella valleys.

The Salton Sea is a shallow, saline endorheic rift lake located directly on the San Andreas Fault within the Imperial and Coachella valleys. With an estimated surface area of approximately 350 square miles, the Salton Sea is the largest lake in California. The average annual inflow is less than 1,200,000 acre-feet, which is enough to maintain a maximum depth of 43 feet and a total volume of about 6,000,000 acre-feet.

The Salton Sea is one of the most important links on the Pacific Flyway, supporting over 400 species of birds and a myriad of invertebrates, including several federally or state listed endangered species, such as the Ridgway's rail, the desert pupfish and the California black rail. The importance of the Salton Sea as an aviary and wildlife preserve

was officially recognized by the federal government with the establishment in 1930 of the wildlife refuge now known as the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge.

The Salton Sea is sustained primarily by agricultural drainage flows from adjacent irrigated farmland. Inflows to the Sea have been declining in recent years, mostly due to IID's implementation of the nation's largest agricultural-to-urban water conservation and transfer program. Since 2003, the Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA) has become the foundation of state and regional water supply resilience during nearly two decades of drought. In fact, the IID's agricultural water users are the most significant contributors to Lower Colorado River Basin conservation efforts, creating more than 5.2 million acre-feet of conserved water since the inception of the QSA.

The financial commitment requested in this letter would be allocated to ensure improvement in three principle areas. First, these funds would be utilized to support the agricultural community by assisting them to engage in expanded water conservation without causing damage to the Salton Sea. Second, these funds would be utilized to ensure that the Salton Sea is protected by programs put in place by the State of California that ensure ongoing agricultural uses are integrated with environmental habitat projects so as to not further desiccate the Salton Sea. Finally, these funds would be utilized to address issues that are developing and have the potential to increase in severity because of decreasing water supplies from the Colorado River as a result of the ongoing drought.

The IID's sole source of water is the Colorado River. As you may be aware, stepping forward to address the challenges associated with the impacts of ongoing drought in the Colorado River Basin, the federal government and the seven Colorado River Basin states have worked extensively to craft a Basin-wide Drought Contingency Plan. To address deleterious environmental and public health consequences of the decreasing water flows to the Salton Sea, a weight that cannot be borne by this farming community and those relying on the farming industry of this area, restoration efforts are being conducted under California's Salton Sea Management Program. However, state funding for the initial 10-year plan under this program has been limited, and this limitation imperils the restoration efforts needed during the next 10 years. Of course, no one can predict the extent and duration of the unprecedented drought conditions plaguing the Colorado River Basin, but a continuation of the drought could very likely lead to additional demands on the Lower Basin's agricultural and non-agricultural users and specifically within California in and around the Salton Sea, as well as in urban areas on the Pacific coast. Such increased demands for water conservation could adversely impact the public health, wildlife habitat and overall environmental wellbeing of the Salton Sea. Federal funding will allow the 10-year plan to move forward—and should provide a bulwark to protect against more serious threats to the Salton Sea should they occur.

The Salton Sea is currently under stress even without the current drought on the Colorado River. Reduced inflows into the Salton Sea have created increased salinity levels that

are now twice that of the Pacific Ocean and a drop in elevation that has exposed more than 20,000 acres of barren salt-covered playa. This impending environmental crisis has nearly destroyed the fishery and wetland aspects of the Salton Sea. The consequential effects on the nearby human populations can be even more devastating. The region is comprised largely of disadvantaged rural communities that are already failing federal air quality standards, saddling them with the state's highest rates of childhood asthma.

Furthermore, as a result of the exposure of more former lakebed, local residents and farmers in this region would likely be faced with increasingly burdensome air quality regulations requiring expensive corrective actions. The imposition of costly regulations or restrictions on Colorado River water consumption could not only diminish agricultural production, but severely harm the surrounding communities who rely on this industry.

While the State of California has secured significant funds to begin implementation of its plan to protect the Salton Sea, there remains a deficit of approximately \$200 million that is required to fully fund this project. The recently signed Farm Bill presents an opportunity to make up this deficit as a partner with the agricultural community to sustain this incredibly productive agricultural resource.

Indeed, through the collective efforts of Senator Dianne Feinstein and a bipartisan coalition of other Western Senators, the new Farm Bill authorizes, among other actions, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to expand its existing Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and Watershed Act pilot projects at the Salton Sea to enhance ongoing conservation, mitigation and restoration efforts. Since 2015, the IID and other local stakeholders have worked with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to address the agricultural and environmental challenges at the Salton Sea.

The new Farm Bill allows the USDA to directly target expedited funding through multiple streamlined, noncompetitive processes that include directly contracting with the State of California to cost-share on Salton Sea projects via extended and expanded pilot projects. Additionally, the conference report directs USDA to use this new authority to mitigate the impact of regional drought agreements on agricultural producers and natural resources.

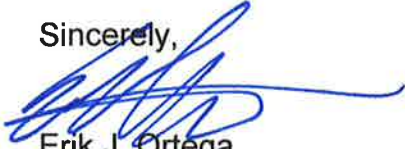
Given these positive changes, it is the IID's desire to meet with you and your staff to discuss the funding opportunities available under the new Farm Bill, including a possible Memorandum of Understanding between the USDA-NRCS and the State of California to build on the existing RCPP partnership at the Salton Sea.

The IID appreciates your consideration of this request and looks forward to meeting with you in the near future to discuss a more expansive partnership with USDA and NRCS that would advance water conservation, resilience and contingency planning in the

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West by directing eligible federal funds where they will do the most good – at the Salton Sea.

Sincerely,



Erik J. Ortega  
President, Board of Directors

cc: Senator Dianne Feinstein  
Senator Kamala Harris  
Congressman Juan Vargas  
Congressman Raul Ruiz